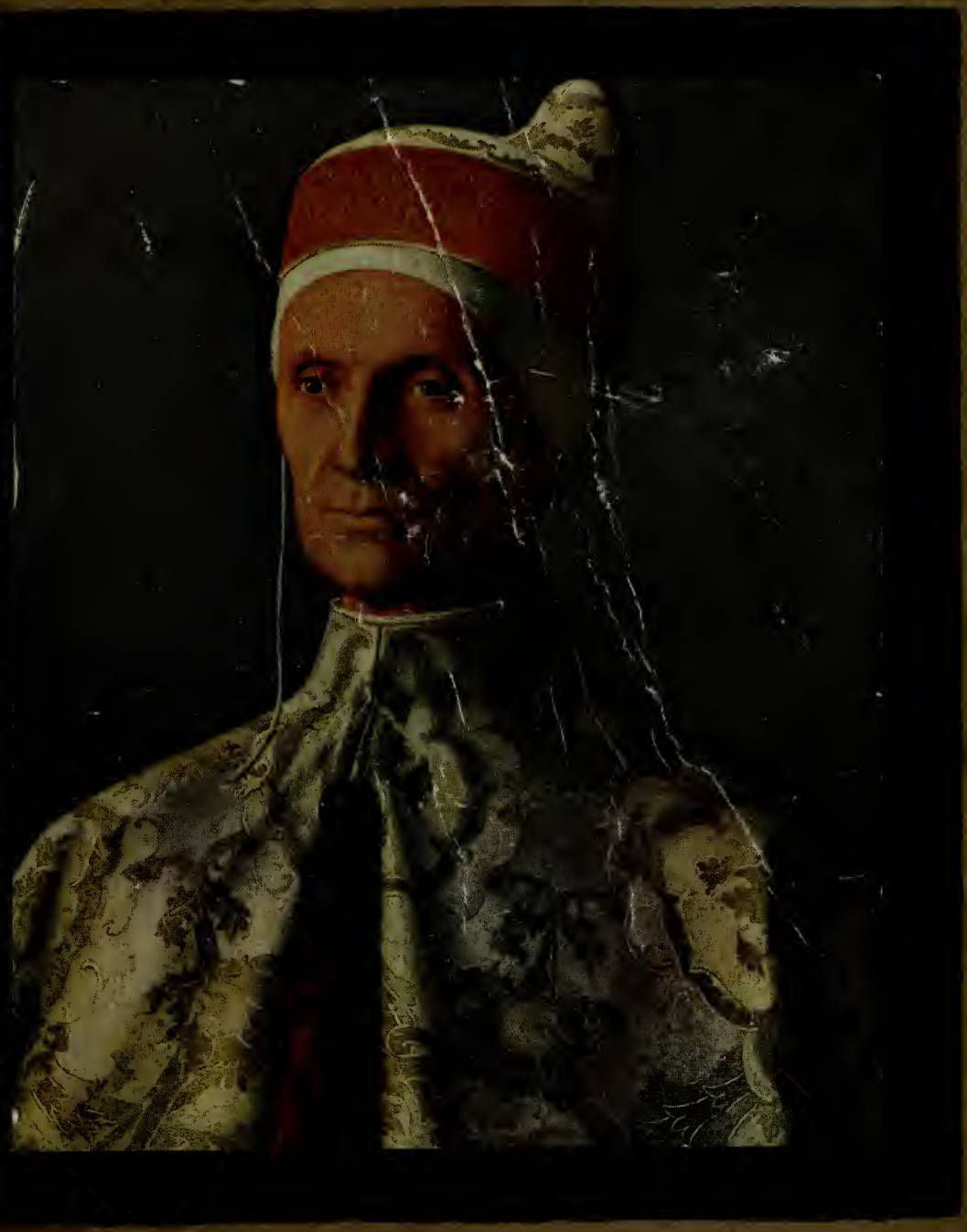
BELLINI



MASTERPIECES IN COLOUR

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MASTERPIECES
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EDITED BY - -
T. LEMAN HARE

GIOVANNI BELLINI

In the Same Series

Artist.	Author.
VELAZQUEZ.	S. L. Bensusan.
REYNOLDS.	S. L. Bensusan.
TURNER.	C. Lewis Hind.
ROMNEY.	C. Lewis Hind.
GREUZE.	Alys Eyre Macklin.
BOTTICELLI.	Henry B. Binns.
ROSSETTI.	Lucien Pissarro.
BELLINI.	George Hay.
FRA ANGELICO.	James Mason.
REMBRANDT.	Josef Israels.
LEIGHTON.	A. Lys Baldry.
RAPHAEL.	Paul G. Konody.
HOLMAN HUNT.	Mary E. Coleridge.
TITIAN	S. L. Bensusan.
MILLAIS.	A. Lys Baldry.
CARLO DOLCI.	George Hay.
GAINSBOROUGH.	Max Rothschild.
TINTORETTO.	S. L. Bensusan.
LUINI.	James Mason.
FRANZ HALS.	Edgcumbe Staley.
VAN DYCK.	Percy M. Turner.
LEONARDO DA VINCI.	M. W. Brockwell.
RUBENS.	S. L. Bensusan.
WHISTLER.	T. Martin Wood.
HOLBEIN.	S. L. Bensusan.
BURNE-JONES.	A. Lys Baldry.
VIGÉE LE BRUN.	C. Haldane MacFall.
CHARDIN.	Paul G. Konody.
FRAGONARD.	C. Haldane MacFall.

In Preparation

J. F. MILLET.	Percy M. Turner.
MEMLINC.	W. H. James Weale.
ALBERT DÜRER.	Herbert Furst.
CONSTABLE.	C. Lewis Hind.
RAEBURN.	James L. Caw.
BOUCHER.	C. Haldane MacFall.
WATTEAU.	C. Lewis Hind.
MURILLO.	S. L. Bensusan.
JOHN S. SARGENT, R.A.	T. Martin Wood.

And Others.

PLATE I.—VIRGIN AND CHILD. (Frontispiece)

This picture is interesting, apart from its fine colour and drawing, on account of the landscape background. It will be remembered that Bellini was one of the first artists to introduce landscape into his pictures of the Virgin. In the Academy at Venice.

759.5
B41ha

BELLINI

BY GEORGE HAY ❀ ❀ ❀

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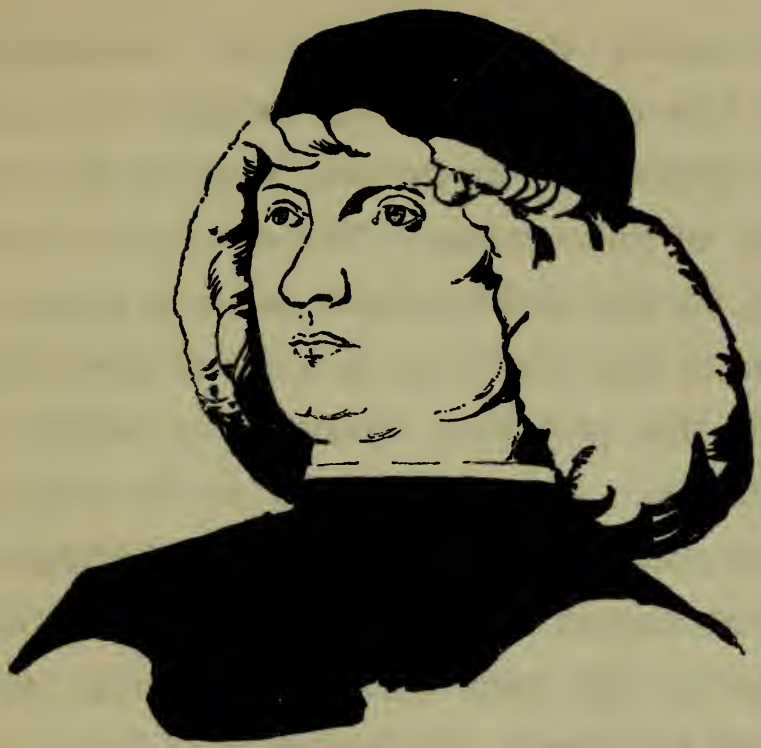

INTRODUCTION

FROM the standpoint of the biographer, it is to be regretted that more of the great Italian artists of the fifteenth century were not associated with the Church. In the days of the most interesting activity of painters and sculptors, the capacity to write

was rarely met beyond the monasteries and few people took the trouble to record any impression of notable men in the early years of their career. We are apt to forget that, for one artist whose name is preserved to us to-day, there are a score of men whose work has perished, whose very names are forgotten. In middle life, or in old age, when commissions from Popes or Emperors had attracted the attention of the world at large to the best men of the time, there might be some chronicler found to make passing but invaluable reference to those of his contemporaries whose names were common in men's mouths, but such notes were made in very haphazard fashion, they were not necessarily accurate, and might be founded upon personal observation or rumour, or even upon the prejudice that was inevitable when Italy was a congerie

of opposing states. Latter-day historians grope painfully and conscientiously after the scanty records of great painters, searching the voluminous writings of men who have little to say, and very little authority for saying anything about the great personalities of the art world of their time. It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that despite much search the record of many lives that must have been fascinating cannot be found. We learn more of the man from his work than we can hope to learn from any written record and, as the taste for studying pictures grows, so all the internal evidence of a man's thought and ways of life accumulates and the message that underlies canvas and stands revealed in colour and line to the trained eye, is translated for the benefit of a curious generation. We learn to know

what manner of man the painter was from the models he chose, the portraits he painted, the qualities and nature of his landscape, the expression of his joy in light and air, his feeling for flowers and birds. By a process of synthetical reasoning we come to see, though it be as in a glass, darkly, the picture that every man paints, from the years of his activity to the last year of his sojourn among mortals—that is the portrait of himself. Doubtless we are often misled, because as each critic, artist or layman, finds in the picture a reflection of what he takes there, it remains difficult to arrive at definite conclusions upon which all men can agree about any painter. Happily the effort pleases our own generation, and as there are many great men who flourished in the fifteenth century and have left their pictures to be their sole

PLATE II.—THE DOGE LOREDANO

This picture, which is of bust length and life size, is one of the ten examples of Giovanni Bellini in the National Gallery, and is perhaps the most important example of the artist as a portrait painter. The Doge wears his state robes and cap of office, and the picture is signed on a cartellino.

IOANNES BELLINVS

monument, there is no lack of work. Naturally in this curious and inquisitive age there are some who would rather discover a well authenticated story about an artist's life than an unexpected masterpiece from his hand, but then the appeal of letters is always more widespread than that of paint. It is always pleasant to endeavour to supply a want, but it is only fair to remember that in writing about people whose life story was not preserved by their contemporaries, the path is strewn with pitfalls.

In dealing with the Italians from the days of Cimabue to Clovio, it has been the custom to depend very largely upon the works of Giorgio Vasari, and to rely for later and more accurate information upon the volumes written by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, passing from them to Morelli and Berenson.

Vasari, to whom the students of Italian art, down to the middle of the sixteenth century, are so deeply indebted, was born in 1512, and lived for more than sixty years. He was a painter and architect, related to Luca Signorelli, and engaged for a great part of his life upon work in Arezzo. He was a great copyist, a painstaking writer, and never did critic wield a milder pen if he chanced to be writing of Florentine art, or a more prejudiced one if he dealt with things of Venice. He was first a patriot and then a critic. One night, he tells us, a friend of Monsignore Giovio expressed a wish to add to his library a treatise on men who had distinguished themselves in the arts of design, from the time of Cimabue down to the year of the conversation. Vasari undertook the work and founded it, he says, upon notes and memo-

randa which he had made from the time when he was a boy. The compilation was finished about the year 1547, it was written at a time when the painter was very busy with commissions. He did his best in a certain prejudiced fashion, and the result for all its defects is very valuable. Naturally enough Vasari had not too large a share of the gifts required for his task, nor had he the necessary facts before him for writing really reliable history. Much that he wrote was accepted *faute de mieux*, but modern researches have necessitated a revision of very many estimates that Vasari formed for us, together with a considerable portion of his facts, and we have learned to understand something of the source and direction of his prejudices.

The literary union of Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who started their joint work in the

latter half of the nineteenth century, with better equipment of facts and a larger measure of critical insight, has been far more valuable, and a complete popular edition of their work revised by sympathetic and well qualified writers is greatly to be desired; but in no case can we regard a volume devoted to the biographies of scores of artists as being altogether reliable. The spirit of study is abroad, to-day men will devote more time to the life story of a comparatively obscure artist than they would have given fifty years ago to half-a-dozen painters of European reputation. It is not easy, one might almost say it is not possible, to tell succinctly the story of men who have left no clear record and were not regarded by their contemporaries as fit and proper subjects for a biography. At best we can study the available sources of in-

formation, and use such measure of judgment as is in us to construct a reasonable and likely narrative. To delve in all manner of likely and unlikely places, to study and make allowances for the prejudices of the time, to rely upon the painted canvas to confirm or confute the printed word—these are the tasks of the conscientious biographer who must not be ill content if, after sifting an intolerable amount of chaff, he can find a few forgotten grains of corn.

I

GIAN BELLINI'S YOUTH

Giovanni, or Gian Bellini as he is generally called, the subject of this brief record and appreciation, is one of the most fascinating painters of the fifteenth century.

He has left many a lovely picture to the world, but alas he was no diarist, he had no Boswell, and there are gaps in the history of his life that will never be filled up. In the vast and unexplored region of Italian archives there may be some facts that research will bring to light, but at present we know very little, and can only be grateful that the story of his life is not shrouded altogether in the mist that obscures so much of the personal history of eminent Venetians in the fifteenth century.

"When zealous efforts are supported by talent and rectitude, though the beginning may appear lowly and poor, yet do they proceed constantly upwards by gradual steps, never ceasing nor taking rest until they have finally attained to the summit of distinction." In this fashion Giorgio Vasari, who in those admirable but unre-

liable "Lives," seldom fails to speak kindly and enthusiastically of artists whom neither he nor his friends had occasion to dislike, begins his account of the house of Bellini. He passes on to deal in detail with Jacopo Bellini, the father of that Giovanni with whose life and work it is proposed to deal briefly in this place. Of the father little is known, but he is said to have lived in the shadow of St. Mark's great Cathedral in Venice, and to have worked under some of the Umbrian masters in the Ducal Palace. He must have served and studied in the studio of Gentile da Fabriano in days when Fra Angelico had not reached the Convent of San Marco; there is evidence, too, that he travelled and painted portraits. The date of his death is as uncertain as the year of his birth. It is said that the new paganism held more attractions for him

than the old faith, and that the most of his commissions were from the great and flourishing secular institutions of the Republic. Little is left of his pictures, but a few delightful sketches are preserved in Paris and London and, but for the larger fame of his sons, Jacopo Bellini would doubtless have been forgotten to-day, and such work as is left would be attributed by leading critics to different masters.

Gentile Bellini seems to have been born between 1425 and 1430 and the date of Giovanni's birth is not known definitely. It may be associated with the year 1430.

At this time it must be remembered that Venice was on the road to her ultimate decline. Costly wars with Milan and Florence had seriously damaged the Exchequer, the fratricidal sea-fights with Genoa had cost a wealth of human life and treasure

PLATE III.—ANGEL PLAYING A LUTE

This is a detail from an altar-piece formerly in the Church of San Giobbé. The work is now in the Academy of Venice.

and, although Venice had annexed nearly a dozen provinces in half a century, the outlay had been out of proportion to the results. At the same time, the Venetians did not know that their splendid state was on the downward road. The new route to India was unknown. Columbus and Diaz had yet to withdraw the sea-borne commerce of the world from Venice to Spain, and so bring about the commercial ruin of the Republic, and the Republic, with her maritime trade and her wealth of spoils from the East, could furnish endless material for the artists who were rising in her midst. Everywhere there was colour in abundance, the "Purple East" cast a broad shadow upon the Adriatic. Then, again, it is worth remarking that the Venetian painters did not concern themselves, as their Florentine brothers did, with matters lying beyond the scope of their

canvas, they did not dally with architecture or sculpture in the intervals of picture painting. In short, pictures represented the tribute of Venice to the arts, and this concentration was not without its influence upon the work done. Literature did not flourish, because the city reared few literary men and the tendency of the citizens was towards pleasure rather than study. All could admire a picture at a time when few could read a book, and the spirit of the Renaissance, fluttering over the Venetian Republic, had done little more than waken its people to a sense of the beauty of the human form. Although in the days when Gian Bellini was a little boy, the terror of the Turkish invasion was upon the eastern end of the Mediterranean, it had hardly reached Venice or, if it had, only through the medium of envoys and kings who came

to ask the assistance of the Republic to keep the Turk from Constantinople. To these appeals the response of Venice in those days could not be very efficacious, but the envoys added a more flamboyant note to the city's colouring, and served an artistic if not a political purpose.

Vasari tells us that Jacopo Bellini painted his pictures not on wood, but on canvas. "In Venice," he writes naïvely, "they do not paint on panel, or if they do use it occasionally they take no other wood but that of the fir, which is most abundant in that city, being brought along the river Adige in large quantities from Germany. It is the custom then in Venice to paint very much upon canvas, either because this material does not so readily split, is not liable to clefts, and does not suffer from the worm, or because pictures on

canvas may be made of such size as is desired, and can also be sent whithersoever the owner pleases, with little cost and trouble." Perhaps Vasari overlooked the effect of sea air upon open frescoed walls, although that effect was clear enough to the Venetians. But Jacopo, for all that he painted upon canvas, and was employed by some of the leading Venetian guilds, makes no outstanding figure upon the page of the art history of Venice. He seems to have lived prosperously, honourably, and intelligently, to have caught the earliest possible reflection of the growing spirit of paganism, thereby incurring the anger and mistrust of the Church party that had regarded painting as the proper intermediary between faith and the general public, to have pleased his state employers in Venice and Padua, and then to have died rather outside

the odour of sanctity, leaving an honourable name behind him, and children who were destined to spread its fame far and wide.

Students of Gian Bellini's life and work can see that only a part of the father's teaching fell upon fruitful soil. Jacopo Bellini, as we have seen, was a man in whom the early religious spirit that the Renaissance did much to cloud over was of small account, but the pagan revival that found so many adherents in Florence and Venice, towards the close of the fifteenth century, left young Gian Bellini almost untouched. We shall see that the commissions offered by wealthy patrons, who had no love for sacred subjects, were either rejected, or were accepted and not fulfilled. It is surely permissible to believe that the teaching of early days had a lasting influence upon the outlook of the

two Bellinis, and strengthened them in the determination to do work that appealed as much to their heart as to their hand. Certainly they followed conscience where it led them. In the case of Gian Bellini, with whom we are mostly concerned here, it is interesting to see that his long life, passed as it was in the very critical time that embraced the fall of Constantinople and the League of Cambrai, was completely free from cloud. His mind was formed very early. He worked strenuously, carefully, and in the fashion that pleased his conscience, till within a very short time of his death, and the serenity of his spirit, clearly revealed in a series of exquisite pictures, was untouched by all that happened in the world around him.

Changes came thick and fast upon Venice in the years when Bellini was hard at work, and new ideas were receiving acceptance

on every hand. The Renaissance, with its revival of pagan thought in the train of learning, scattered new ideas throughout the Venetian studios. Bellini's pupil and successor Titian could depict pagan goddess and Christian Deity with equal facility. Giorgione was travelling along the same paths when death overtook him, but Gian Bellini, while he continued to make progress in his art, refused to make any concession to the pagan spirit, and with one possible exception in the case of the Bacchanals, a picture painted for the Duke of Ferrara, now in the Alnwick Castle Collection, his last pictures were as devout in thought and feeling as the first.

It seems strange, perhaps, to express doubts about a picture that bears the painter's signature, and has been freely accepted as the work of his hands, but we must not forget

that the fifteenth-century painters in Italy were the directors of a school as well as the tenants of a studio. The Bellini and Vivarini families were at the head of Venetian painters, and consequently the best students of the time were attracted to their studios, content to mix colours, prepare canvases, and paint the less important parts of a commissioned picture. After a time they even painted pictures, and signed them with the master's name. We have certain facts in connection with the Ferrara picture, and few facts are to be found in the case of any others. It is on record that Bellini took an unfinished picture to Ferrara, completed it under the eye of the Duke, and received eighty-five ducats for it. The question becomes whether this is the picture now at Alnwick that Titian finished, because those who know it say that the background has

PLATE IV.—MADONNA WITH THE HOLY CHILD ASLEEP

This is one of the most beautiful of the painter's studies of a familiar theme, and appeals to the spectator from the literary as well as the artistic side. The original is in the Venice Academy.

a landscape of the familiar Titian kind, with glimpses of Cadore and Pieve, where the younger painter was born. We are left, then, with the almost certain knowledge that Titian painted a part of the "Bacchanal" picture, and that the other part is opposed in sentiment to Bellini's theories of art. So the sceptics do not lack a measure of justification.

In the latter days of his life Bellini's studio became something like a factory, and there seems very little reason to doubt that some of his clever pupils like Bondinelli, Bissolo, Marconi, Catena and others were allowed to sign, with the master's name, "Ioannes Bellinus," pictures that had no more than the slightest acquaintance with the master's brush. One of the most distinguished of our modern critics, Mr. Bernhard Berenson, attended an exhibition of Venetian pictures held in London a few years ago, and

found that the great majority of the pictures attributed to Bellini were by his pupils. He pointed out then that the signature upon which the unfortunate owners were accustomed to lean was no better than a broken reed. Bellini, of course, was not the only offender in this respect. His great pupil Titian copied the master's fault, and there is on record a letter from Frederic, Duke of Mantua, asking Titian to send out work that has his touch as well as his signature. With these facts before us, it becomes permissible to doubt whether Bellini, in the last years of a long life devoted to sacred work, elected to turn aside, and yield deliberately to the pagan movement he had opposed so long. We can find no other work of his hand that is directly opposed to his theories of religious art, though it is fair to remember that he had a very active mind,

and even responded to the influence of his own great pupils Titian and Giorgione.

II

MIDDLE LIFE

It is not easy to say how far a great painter reflects his time and how far he influences it. Tradition and surroundings must needs count for much, but their exact value is not easy to estimate. Indeed the influence of a man is often strongest upon the generations that succeed to his own, for no hints are left of the doubts and difficulties that beset the master. The attitude of the Venetians towards art in the fifteenth century, when Gian Bellini started his work, differed from that of the Florentines by reason of the splendid isolation of Venice.

The State was a law to herself; she instituted her own customs, she ruled her own life. Her wars had less effect than her commercial victories upon those of her citizens who turned their thoughts towards art, the stress and strife beyond her boundaries left her artists comparatively untouched. The wider significance of the Renaissance hardly reached her, her people were not only pleasure-loving, but self-centred. Happily, Jacopo Bellini was by way of being a traveller and his experiences were not lost upon his children. He knew Florence and worked in the city at a time when her great men were beginning to rise in all their lasting glory, he may have seen Brunelleschi himself at work upon the Duomo. He knew Padua, where the tradition of Giotto was very strong, though that great master himself had long passed away,

PLATE V.—PIETA

This fine example of the master's art may be seen at the Brera Gallery in Milan.

and so he brought to the art he practised in his own city something of the technique of the new movement, as well as the very definite touch of the pagan sentiment that was to be developed in all its beauty by his son's pupils Titian and Giorgione. The effect of his travels, limited though they were, was very lasting, and though Gian Bellini did not see life as his father had seen it, his work paved the way for the masters whose work was in some aspects greater than his. In his early days Venice had no very distinctive art. What there was seems to have been ecclesiastical in thought and extremely formal in design. It was the appeal of the clericals to a people who could neither write nor read, but although a State may erect boundaries and may devote itself to the enjoyment of prosperity, those who care for the claims of art cannot escape

altogether from the forces that are at work in surrounding cities. One of the chief forces at work in Northern Italy was the revival of learning that seems to have marched side by side with the discovery of personal beauty. The Church had kept beauty in the background, the Renaissance brought it to the canvas of every artist. Bellini turned the discovery of personal beauty to the service of the Madonna.

Students of the life of Fra Angelico know that a Dominican preacher exercised a very great effect upon the painter's life, and was responsible for sending him, at a very early age, to the great Convent of the Dominicans at Fiesole. There he was received as a brother, and from the shelter of the cloister he gave his art message to the world, his story being preserved to us at the same time because the progress of the Dominicans

was recorded. A few years later Giovanni Bellini, then a boy newly in his teens, would seem to have fallen under a very similar influence. He was not fourteen when St. Bernardino came to Padua and preached the doctrine of godliness and Jew-baiting to a people who were not ill-disposed towards asceticism. In the fifteenth century a boy of fourteen was a man. The Pope made Cardinals of lads who were still younger and many, who have left their names written large in Italian history, were married when they were fifteen. Gian Bellini would have been assisting his father in the decoration of the Gattemelata Chapel of Padua at the time and there is no doubt that St. Bernardino's addresses impressed him very deeply. To be sure he did not go into a religious house after the fashion of Fra Angelico, but he turned his thoughts towards

religion, and for the rest of his long life his brush was kept almost exclusively for the service of sacred art. The tendencies towards paganism that his father is known to have shown held no attraction for him. He sought to express the beauty of the New Testament stories, and it is hard to find throughout all Italy an artist whose achievements in that direction can vie with his, for Gian Bellini brought sensuous beauty and rare qualities of emotion to canvas for the first time in the history of painting.

In those early days of the middle century there were two acknowledged leaders of painting in the world that young Bellini knew. The first was his father, who is said to have studied in the studios of Gentile da Fabriano (1370 to 1450), and that of Pisanello who was born somewhere about the same

time as da Fabriano, and died a year later. It is worth noting that Jacopo Bellini called one of his sons Gentile after his earliest master, though whether Gentile or Giovanni was the elder son remains uncertain. Mr. Roger Fry, who writes with great authority upon the subject, is of opinion that Gian may have been a natural son of Jacopo, and in those days when Popes had "nephews" in abundance, and the marriage vow was more honoured in the breach than the observance, very little stigma attached to illegitimacy. The other great painter of Gian Bellini's time was the Paduan painter Squarcione, who presided over a large and flourishing school in his native city, and did work that was quite as good as that of his contemporaries. He adopted as his son a lad from Padua or Mantua named Andrea Mantegna, who was destined to take such high rank

among the painters of the Venetian School.

Although Padua and Venice were in a sense rivals, there seems to have been a very friendly understanding for many years between Squarcione and Jacopo Bellini, so that Gian and Gentile were able to watch the progress of the Paduan master and his pupils, and to decide for themselves how much they would accept, and what they would reject of the teaching. In early years these influences must have been of great value to the painter, but happily they were not destined to be lasting, for when Gian's sister married Andrea Mantegna, Squarcione quarrelled with his adopted son, and the intimacy with the Bellini family came to an end. This is as it should have been in the best interests of Gian Bellini's art, for when he returned to Venice and settled down

there permanently, he was able to follow his own ideas, and free himself from what was bad in the influence of the stiff, formal, and lifeless school of Padua.

Venice must have been a remarkable city in those years. To-day it stimulates the imagination as few cities in Europe can do, then it must have been one of the wonders of the world. There are some striking accounts of the city written in the latter part of the fifteenth century, and though space does not permit any quotation at length, one brief paragraph will not be out of place. Philippe de Comines, envoy of Charles VIII., came to Venice in 1494, and recalled his impressions of that city in his memoirs. "I was taken along the High Street," he writes, "they call it the Grand Canal, and it is very broad, galleys cross it; and it is the fairest street, I believe, that may

be in the whole world, and fitted with the best houses; the ancient ones are painted, and most have a great piece of porphyry and serpentine on the front. It is the most triumphant city I have ever seen, and doth most honour to ambassadors and strangers. It doth most wisely govern itself, and the service of God is most solemnly performed. Though the Venetians have many faults, I believe God has them in remembrance for the reverence they pay in the service of His Church." This brief tribute to the charm of Venice is of special value because it helps us to understand why the Venetians were not strenuous seekers after knowledge, why their painters did no more than paint, and why their response to the humanities was so small. It explains the decorative quality of Bellini's pictures, the splendour of their colours. Pageantry

PLATE VI.—ALLEGORY: THE BARQUE OF LOVE

This is one of a little series of panel pictures by Bellini that may be seen in the Academy at Venice. The others depict Evil, Fate, Luxury, and Zeal, and Prudence. This picture is sometimes called "Venus ruling the World," but such a title seems rather foreign to the painter's own attitude.

and ceremonial were the great desires of Venetian life, the man who could add to the lustre of a State procession along the splendid water-way of the Grand Canal was more to them than the scholar who had written a treatise that moved the more learned Florentines to admiration. Life was so full of pleasure, so varied in its appeals, that the Venetians could not spare time, or even develop the will to study. They had raised the old cry "panem et circenses" and, in the days of Gian Bellini, there was no lack of either. History is full of records that reveal other nations in a similar light, philosophers have drawn the inevitable conclusions—and the trend of life is no wise altered.

Under Bellini, painting lost the conventions that had been regarded as correct or inevitable in Squarcione's studio, and Gian's

pictures bear the same relation to those of the Paduan, and his pupil, as Newman's writing bears to bad eighteenth-century English prose. But despite all developments in the technique of his art, Gian Bellini's painting remained quite constant to the mood that St. Bernardino had induced. Doubtless, had his gifts been of another kind, he would have entered the Church, he would have dreamed dreams and seen visions that would not have found such world-wide expression while, being an artist, inheriting artistic traditions from his father, living in the centre of the small world of Venetian and Paduan painters, he expressed his beautiful emotions in fashion that has not weakened its claim upon us in more than four hundred years. The glamour of Venetian life, the extraordinary beauty of the city that was his home, the splendour and

the pageants that were part of a Venetian life, the intensity of the colour that surrounded him on all sides—some of it belonging to Venice by right, and even more, brought to her shores by the ceaseless traffic of the sea—all these things developed and deepened the emotion that was to find so exquisite an expression from his brush. To him, as to Fra Angelico, faith was a real and living thing, and like the great monk who died at ripe age while he was yet a boy, Gian Bellini became a lover of the world in its most picturesque aspect, accepting without hesitation the traditional explanation of its creation.

Naturally enough his appeal to the artist is founded upon a dozen considerations, mostly technical, his appeal to the layman is direct and spontaneous. A countryman who has never seen a studio can respond to

the exquisite beauty of Bellini's Virgins and Children, can feel the charm of the sunshine that fills the air and lights sea and land, can recognise the infinite glamour of the roads that wind away into the mysterious distance of the background, can enjoy the rich, almost sensuous, colouring. Perhaps had Bellini taken the vows, a great part of these beauties would have been lost, the infinite variety of lovely women and children could hardly have been secured. As a Venetian, and a pleasure lover, he could not have responded, as Fra Angelico did, to the restricted life and rigid discipline of a religious order.

It was not easy for Gian Bellini to devote himself entirely to sacred subjects if he wished to earn a living by his brush, because his father had stood outside the Church. In those days, too, the best church-

work was in the hands of one family, the Vivarini, whose monopoly was hardly likely to be disturbed by an artist who could show no better credentials than a connection, legitimate or illegitimate, with a painter whose feeling was distinctly pagan. Jacopo Bellini, for all that he was a most admired artist, had no claims upon the Church, and does not seem to have received many commissions from it. Various wealthy societies in Venice had been accustomed to employ him to decorate their halls with work that, as we have said before, has been lost, and their guilds or *scuole* would doubtless have given Gian all the work he wished to do had he been satisfied to do it.

He could not choose for himself. St. Bernardino had chosen for him in those years when his mind was most impressionable. Gian Bellini's hand was doubtless

to be seen in Padua where he assisted his father, and his earliest independent work is to be found in the Casa Correr at Venice, where one finds a "Transfiguration," a "Crucifixion," and two "Pietas." He painted portraits, one from our own National Gallery is to be seen here. This is a picture of the Doge, Leonardo Loredano, who held office from 1501 to 1521.

The early pictures reveal Bellini at the parting of the ways. His figures have many of the defects of the School of Padua. His knowledge of anatomy is decidedly small, he lacks confidence in himself, and yet it is not difficult to recognise that the painter is moving into a new country, that his presentation of sacred subjects is developing on lines that must add considerably to their artistic value and to the permanence of their appeal.

An amusing story is told of the way in which young Bellini acquired his knowledge of oil painting. He is said to have assumed the dress of a Venetian nobleman, and to have gone to the studio of a popular artist of the time, under pretext of having his portrait painted. While the artist, one Antonello of Messina, was busily engaged upon his portrait, Bellini is said to have watched the process very carefully and to have secured the much needed lesson. It is more than likely that the story is untrue, but it has obtained a large measure of credence.

His first big altar-piece is said to have been done for the altar of St. Catherine of Sienna, and after one or two other church paintings had been accomplished, Giovanni was commissioned to decorate the great Council Hall of Venice with historical paintings. But it is well to remember that

altar painting never ceased to interest him, his greatest achievements having been accomplished for churches. There are few things in art more beautiful than Gian Bellini's altar-pieces. Ruskin has paid a special tribute to the "Virgin and Four Saints" in the church dedicated to St. Zaccaria, father of the Baptist. He says that the Zaccaria altar-piece, and the one in the Frari, by the same master, are the two finest pictures in the world. Of the big works, however, nothing remains, Gentile being the only one of the family who is represented to-day by pictures painted on a very large scale. Vasari tells us that Gian painted four pictures in fulfilment of a commission, one representing the Pope Alexander III. receiving Frederic Barbarossa after the abjuration of the Schism of 1177, the next showing the Pope saying Mass in San

PLATE VII.—MADONNA AND CHILD

This picture shows the centre figures of a very famous painting by Bellini in the Academy at Venice in which the Madonna and Child are seen between St. Catherine and St. Mary Magdalen. The faces most delightfully painted are full of spiritual grace and the colouring is exquisite.

Marco, another representing his Holiness in the act of presenting a canopy to the Doge, and the last in which the Pontiff is presented with eight standards and eight silver trumpets by clergy assembled outside the gates of Rome. These subjects or some of them had been painted by one Gueriento of Verona when Marco Corner was Doge. Petrarch had written the inscriptions for them, but they had faded, and in later years Tintoretto painted his "Paradiso" over the damaged frescoes. There is a story to the effect that Giovanni and Gentile Bellini had promised the councillors that their pictures should last two hundred years; as a matter of fact, they would seem to have been destroyed by fire within half that period.

The style of the picture commissioned makes its own significant commentary upon the times. It was always considered advis-

able to stir in the Venetians appreciation for State ceremonial, which encouraged so much of the pageantry associated with Venetian life and, even if Giovanni Bellini had no keen taste for such work, he could not refuse a commission that would establish his name among his fellow countrymen. To-day the Sala del Maggior Consiglio holds pictures by Titian, Paul Veronese, and other artists who followed closely upon Gian Bellini's era.

III

THE LATTER DAYS

Shortly after the Council Hall pictures had been undertaken, in 1479, to be exact, the Sultan, Mohammed II., conqueror of Constantinople, wished to have his portrait

painted, and applied to the Doge of Venice to send him a competent artist to do the work. It should be remembered that the Sultan had been waging a successful war upon Venice, and that in January 1479 the State had ceded Scutari, Stalimene, and other territory and had agreed to pay an indemnity of 200,000 ducats, with a tribute of 10,000 ducats a year for trading rights and the exercise of consular jurisdiction in Constantinople. Naturally the success of the Turks, who had taken Constantinople in 1454, was making a very great impression throughout Europe, and Venice had striven to the uttermost to rouse the Powers to concerted action, but in those days nobody was anxious to trust the Republic. These are matters, of course, that pertain to history rather than art, but it is curious to remember that throughout the times when

the watchers from St. Mark's Tower saw the reflected glare of burning cities, when the security of Christian Europe was threatened seriously, when plagues were devastating Venice, Gian Bellini seems to have gone on his way all undisturbed, painting his pictures in the most leisurely fashion, and the fact that art stood right above politics and strife is clearly shown in the action of the Sultan in sending to Venice for a good artist as soon as peace had been restored. There seems to have been some question of sending Gian because his brother was busily engaged on other work in the Ducal Palace, but after a while it was decided to send Gentile, who painted a portrait of the Sultan that found its way afterwards into the Layard Collection in Venice. Some surprise has been expressed that the Sultan should have

allowed any one to paint his portrait, because portrait painting is forbidden by the Koran,[1] but Mohammed II. was a man of very advanced ideas and he not only gave sittings to Gentile Bellini, but treated him with the greatest favour, dismissing him with many marks of approval and great gifts. Among the presents brought back to Venice by the painter were the armour and sword of the great Doge Dandolo, who had been buried in the year 1205 in the private chapel in St. Sophia. Mohammed II. had caused the great tomb to be destroyed, but he sent the great patriot's armour back to its native land. Vasari tells us that the meeting between the brothers on Gentile's return to Venice was most affectionate.

This journey to Constantinople would

[1] Mohammed said: "If ye must make pictures, make them of trees and things without souls. Verily every painter is condemned to hell fire."

seem to have added to the reputation of the house of Bellini, and to have increased the demand for portraits by both brothers. This, in its way, would doubtless have led to the multiplying of school pieces. History has very little to tell of the progress of the brothers during the years that followed. We know that the Doge Loredano, whose portrait has been painted by Gian Bellini, succeeded to his high office in 1501, that Titian would have been working in Bellini's studio then, and that Bellini himself was in the enjoyment of what was known as a broker's patent, and was official painter to the State. His was the duty of painting the portrait of every Doge who succeeded to the control of Venetian affairs during his term of office, and he also painted any historical picture in which the Doge had to figure. There was a salary attached to the office,

and the work was quite light. As far as we can tell Gian Bellini was still averse from painting secular subjects. He was now an old man, but he had made great progress in his work, conquering many of the difficulties of perspective, shadow, and colouring that had baffled his predecessors. The pageants demanded by the great Mutual Aid Societies (*Scuole*) from the artists in their employ, he would seem to have left to his brother Gentile, for these pictures had a big political purpose to serve, and they demanded the travel, the experience, and the mood that Gian lacked. His brush was sufficiently occupied with altar-pieces and portraits of distinguished Venetians, now, alas, lost to the world.

One incident that is not without its instructive side in this connection is recorded in the year 1501, when Isabella, Duchess of

Mantua, sent her agent in Venice to Gian Bellini to arrange with him to paint a secular subject. The old painter, now in the neighbourhood of his seventieth year, accepted money on account, and then turned his thoughts to other things. The agent worried him from time to time with little or no effect, and wrote despairing letters to the Duchess to convey Bellini's various excuses. Not until 1504, when the Duchess was proposing to take legal action, was the picture finished, and then it does not seem to have been what was required. At the same time it must have been a work of great merit, because a year later we find the Duchess commissioning another picture, and asking for a secular subject, which the old painter after much hesitation refused to paint.

Happily Isabella d'Este was not only a voluminous letter writer, but her correspon-

PLATE VIII.—MADONNA AND CHILD

This picture is from the Brera Gallery in Milan and is held by many of the painter's admirers to be his finest presentment of the Mother and the Son. It is certainly a work of most enchanting beauty, one to which the eye turns again and again.

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dence has been preserved, and some forty letters were written in connection with the Bellini picture, by the lady whom Cardinal Bembo called "the wisest and most fortunate of women," and of whom a poet wrote, "At the sound of her name all the Muses rise and do reverence." She had seen Bellini's work, and had admired it in Venice, before she asked a friend, one Signor Vianello, to secure a picture for her *camerino*. At first the old painter raised objections, says Vianello. "I am busy working for the Signory in the Palace," he said, "and I cannot leave my work from early morning until after dinner." Then he asked for 150 ducats and said he would make time, then he came down to 100 ducats and accepted 25 on account. Then as has been explained, he declared that he could not undertake the class of subject that the

Duchess wanted, and Isabella wrote to say that she would accept anything antique that had a fine meaning. Vianello writes in reply to say that Bellini has gone to his country villa and cannot be reached, and the correspondence and the years pass, until at last the Duchess gets quite cross and writes, "We can no longer endure the villainy of Giovanni Bellini," and goes on to instruct her agent to make application to the Doge, Leonardo Loredano, the one whose portrait, painted by Giovanni Bellini, is in our National Gallery, to commit the old painter for fraud. To this action Bellini responds by showing Vianello that he has a "Nativity" three parts finished, and after a time he sends it to the Duchess together with a very humble letter of apology, that the lady is good enough to accept. She even writes, "Your 'Nativity' is as dear to us as any picture we possess."

In 1506 Albert Dürer was in Venice where he declares that he found the Venetians very pleasant companions, and adds with sly sarcasm that some of them knew how to paint. At the same time he records his fear lest any of them should put poison in his food, but speaks in high terms and without suspicion of Gian Bellini who had praised his work and offered to buy a picture. All these things are small matters enough, but unhappily the records of Bellini's life are so scanty that it is hard to find anything more until the year 1513 when Gian Bellini, well over eighty, found his position as official painter challenged by his pupil Titian, who presented a petition to the Council of Ten, stating *inter alia* that he was desirous of a little fame rather than of profit, that he had refused to serve the Pope, and that he wanted the first

broker's patent that should be vacant in the Fondaco de' Tedeschi on the same conditions as those granted to Messer Zuan Bellin.[1] The work that was being done was the restoration of the Great Hall of the Council, and the painting had been in progress for some forty years, Gian Bellini and two pupils being now engaged upon it. There is no doubt that this application by Titian annoyed Bellini's friends and pupils, and even to us it seems a little unreasonable and in bad form to clamour so eagerly for a place that was already occupied. But it would seem to have been the custom of the time to apply early for any privilege of this kind, for we find in later years that Tintoretto applied for Titian's place long before the older master's capacity for working had come to an end.

[1] This was the Venetian way of spelling Gian Bellini's name.

Bellini's friends were successful, although it would appear that the old painter's progress had been too slow completely to satisfy the Council of Ten. In the following year Titian, who had been allowed to start work, was told that he must wait until older claims were satisfied, the expenses of his assistants were disallowed, and his commission came to an end. In the autumn of that year Titian brought another petition to the Council, asking once more for the first vacant broker's patent, and mentioning the fact that Bellini's days could not be long in the land. Just about this time the Venetian authorities seem to have held an inquiry into the progress of the work that was being done in the Hall of the Great Council, only to find that the amount of money they had spent should have secured them a far larger amount of work than had been

accomplished. It is hardly surprising that these inquiries should have become necessary, there must have been a great laxity in the State departments in the years following the working out of the plans that had been made by France, Austria, Spain, and the Pope at Cambrai. In the last few years Venice had been fighting for her life, Lombardy had passed out of her hands, Verona, Vicenza, and Padua had followed. The Republic had even been forced to seek aid from the Sultans of Turkey and Egypt, and although Venice was destined to emerge from her troubles and light the civilised world a little longer there is small cause for wonder if, in the times of exceptional excitement, her statesmen had not given their wonted attention to the progress of the arts. Doubtless Gian Bellini's leisurely methods and failing strength were account-

able for the slow progress of the pictures in the Council Hall, and Titian took advantage of the fact to send in a third petition, offering to finish some work at his own expense, but he had no occasion to take much more trouble.

On November 29, 1516, Gian Bellini died, well on the road to his ninetieth year, "and there were not wanting in Venice," says Vasari, "those who by sonnets and epigrams sought to do him honour after his death as he had done honour to himself and his country during his life." One cannot help thinking that half-a-dozen pages of biography would have been worth a bushel of sonnets.

With Gian Bellini the last great painter of purely religious subjects passed away. He had stood between art and paganism. Perhaps the younger men found him narrow

and pedantic, but it is certain that so long as Gian Bellini was the leading painter of Venice it was not easy for pictures to respond to the ever growing demands that followed the Renaissance. Now the road was clear, painting was to reach its highest point in the work of Giorgione and Titian, and was then to decline almost as rapidly as it had risen.

Gian Bellini for all the wide influence that he exerted, not only upon contemporary painting, but upon sculpture too, sent very little work out of Venice. Examples are to be seen in cities that are comparatively close at hand, Rimini, Pesaro, Vicenza, Bergamo, and Turin, but his genius seems to have been too completely recognised in his own city for his work to travel far afield, and the portrait of himself in the Uffizi Gallery is no more than a

pupil's work with a studio signature. One of his last undisputed paintings was for the altar of St. Crisostom in Venice. It is said that he painted it at the age of eighty-five. After death his fame suffered by the rise of those stars of Venetian painting, Titian, Giorgione, and Tintoretto, and throughout three centuries his work was held in comparatively small esteem, perhaps because it was often judged by the studio pictures with the forged signatures. As late as the middle of the nineteenth century nobody seemed quite to know the real pictures from the false ones, but with the rise of critics like Crowe, Morelli, and Berenson a much better state of things has been established. Copies and student works have been separated from the originals, careful study of technique and mannerism has made clear a large number of

points that were doubtful and in dispute, and although the process of separating the sheep from the goats has reduced considerably the number of works that can be accepted as genuine, the gain to the artist's reputation atones for the loss.

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